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## SOCIAL MOTIVES FOR COMPOSITION<sup>1</sup>

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I have been asked to present to you some composition projects that involve a strong social motive. Before I do that specifically and in some detail, let me give you briefly my viewpoint. Since we no longer say that education is a preparation for life but is life itself, an English teacher should be keen to bring within the walls of the schoolroom problems that show life conditions. The pupil should be given the chance, under wise guidance, to try out his powers in a very real situation where he will act from the same motives that will drive him when the school has sent him on. The presence of an adequate motive will make his school work full of purpose. We should be willing to accept motives that seem worth while to boys and girls, even if they do not seem so worth while to us adults. For when such a motive has made its appeal, what a bending of energy to the problem in hand there is; what an enthusiasm fills the eye with a vision large and fair; what initiative and originality appear in the attack!

What I shall say relates to only one type of motives. While the other types are all potent in the high-school period, especially helpful are the social motives. This is true largely because of the peculiar characteristics of the adolescent. His growing vision and his developing sense for team work lead him to put all his energy and enthusiasm into a problem that affects both him and his fellows. He wants a part in a big undertaking; he wants to help, and is especially happy when he has such an opportunity. By recognizing these characteristics the pupil can be easily placed by his English teacher in a situation where the conditions approximate closely those of real life outside of the school; where similar motives, the desire to entertain or to instruct or to

<sup>1</sup> A paper read before the National Council of Teachers of English at Richmond, Virginia, February 28, 1914.

communicate with his fellows, will operate. By responding to these motives and by having his solution of the problem checked up by a wise friend, his instructor, he will be much better prepared to act unaided when his school days are over. How this may be done through the use of simple and yet effective social motives for composition, easily found and employed, I shall attempt to show by referring to problems that have been worked out under ordinary school conditions. Because I refer to what the teachers in the English department of the Manual Training High School have done it does not argue that these things are original there, or are better done there than elsewhere. I refer to them because I know the conditions and therefore can speak with more confidence.

Perhaps when ultimate use is considered, next to ability to speak effectively, the graduate of the high school will need the ability to write a letter with accuracy, courtesy, and some degree of intelligence as to suitability in substance for the occasion. But unless forethought is given to the assignment and a motive furnished, the practice in school will not fix either correct form or any saving sense of fitness of matter to the occasion. The school, however, abounds in opportunities for genuine practice of this sort. Pupils welcome the chance to measure themselves against such problems, little realizing that they are doing so when the right motive is present.

When I wrote a letter to the pupils with a question about the work of the term just closing and asked a frank answer, I got it. The teachers read my typewritten letter to the pupils, who then answered my question. Fully, frankly, courteously they replied to a real letter addressed to them. More than once that week I was stopped in the hall to be asked whether I had read the questioner's letter; he thought he had made a good point. When a class reading Carl Schurz's *Essay on Lincoln* decided to give a program on the fiftieth anniversary of the Gettysburg Speech, they needed an audience. They were allowed to invite another class reading the same essay and reciting during the same hour. A pupil was given the name of a member of the class to be invited and he wrote a personal invitation. This demanded accuracy of form and suitability of expression. The attitude of the class was, That

other class must not be allowed to find mistakes in what we send them. So the class and the teacher had a busy hour answering the questions that arose—vital questions, too, they were, that had to have an answer, then and there to be incorporated into the note on the desk. Team play came in when a committee of pupils who had made a reputation among their fellows for accuracy was appointed to look over each note before it was sent. Of course these notes were answered, and thus the other class had its motive for careful, accurate work. When at the last minute it was found that other classes could be invited, there was time to write only a general invitation for a class. Each class answered by sending a pupil with a reputation for good speech to accept orally the invitation on its behalf. These messengers certainly had a genuine motive for standing before an audience to make a graceful little speech.

Once more in a perfectly natural way did this exercise furnish a reason for writing a letter. A note from me to the teacher brought a bundle of letters in which each writer told what his part in the preparation of the program had been. To this class I replied, expressing my pleasure in what they had done. Thus one simple little class exercise furnished an opportunity to write letters under the conditions that govern real correspondence.

A special day in the school calendar may offer the opportunity the teacher is awaiting to have the pupils test themselves in a genuine situation. To write a gracious letter of appreciation demands insight, feeling, and power to express adequately the sentiment proposed. Too extravagant expression does not ring true; too blunt a phrasing falls cold and flat. How embarrassing to a writer to have the wish to send a note of appreciation and yet to be conscious that he does not know how to say what he feels!

Our chance to have the pupils meet the problem of a note of appreciation came on the birthday of James Whitcomb Riley. All the schools of the city were planning some celebration of the day. Ours took the form of letters. The English time for two days was spent in talking about Mr. Riley, reading and reciting his poems, and in discussing the state-wide plan of giving him a poetry shower. On the third day each pupil wrote a letter to the poet expressing

whatever he thought would be appropriate to say upon this occasion. Then each class selected a committee of pupils who chose the three most suitable letters. From these letters teachers familiar with the standards of the grade made a final selection of one, so that a group of eight letters was sent to the poet. While these letters were being written and copied on proper stationery, an art class designed in competition and made a suitable portfolio, with a hand-lettered foreword, to contain the birthday offering. Thus, this occasion not only furnished a genuine motive for letter writing and co-operation on the part of the English pupils, but also in a natural manner brought two departments into close co-operation.

When a teacher asks a class what topics relating to school life would interest an absent boy who is sick, and volunteers then write letters telling of these things, the class has had more than merely a well-motivated lesson in letter-writing. It has seen a portion of life with its proper appeal to sympathy.

In the business-correspondence class there is opportunity to turn school needs to practical account. When the school paper wanted the alumni to subscribe, what better motive could a school-boy have for writing "Letters That Pull"? When the class selected five letters that it thought had the necessary power in them, mailed them out to a selected list, and tabulated the returns to discover whether this selling campaign had been successful, it had worked through a genuine business experience. When its advertising posters went onto the blackboards of the rooms, again the result had to stand a test that was real.

All of the composition projects referred to so far have been developed through the motive of communication. In each, however, the social idea was strong and the exercise was made possible by taking advantage of the social opportunities the school afforded. Change the motive slightly, and another field of problems opens. When the desire is to instruct classmates or school-fellows, the work done by the pupils will be animated by a distinct purpose. Here are some projects that brought this motive into play.

A senior class had presented the school with sections of the Parthenon Frieze. When these had been placed upon the auditorium wall, a senior composition section that meets daily prepared

a program to explain the gift to lower-grade pupils. The work began with a talk by the teacher, which was followed by wide, rapid reading. Oral reports day by day kept the section informed of the progress made. School library, city library, state library, and private libraries were searched for information. Letters of inquiry were written; an invitation to visit the private library of a Greek professor was accepted, and the courtesy of the gentleman and his wife was properly acknowledged. Later, when the work was finished, other notes of appreciation were written to those who had been of assistance.

After a week of preparatory reading, the class decided upon a program to present these topics: the Acropolis: an Ode, a Description, a Historical Sketch; the Parthenon: Its Use, Its Religious Significance, Its Architecture; the Panathenaic Festival; Phidias; the Frieze; Our Set of Panels. Several pupils wrote upon each topic. Then the class selected for a place upon the program the one who could present what he had in the most effective way for the purpose in hand. One boy wrote an ode which possessed considerable merit. The audience had a most enjoyable hour and went away with a clear idea of the beauty and significance of a great work of art. The class in two weeks had carried to successful completion a project of real benefit to the school. For we expect to use the papers to inform new students about our portion of the frieze.

When the school needed a suitable program for Fire Prevention Day, in a week a senior composition section furnished it. The scheme this time, while similar to the one just mentioned, showed some variation in handling the team work. A committee of three visited the state fire marshal and citizens known to be interested and brought back suggestions and material. This committee also made the program. Topics were put on the board, assigned, looked up, and reported on. The class was divided into sections to secure the material needed for the final topics. Whenever anyone found material on a topic not assigned to him, it was not discarded, but was turned over to the group that could use it. Thus a fine *esprit de corps* was developed and the value of effective team work was demonstrated.

In the vocational guidance work of the school a study was to be made of a large pharmaceutical manufactory. This concern was so large and so complex in its organization that to present it as a valuable type of industry was indeed a problem. The scheme finally took shape thus: a committee of fifteen students, three for each of the five main departments of the business, visited the plant and learned as much as possible about the manner in which the business was conducted.

These students were selected from upper classes in subjects most nearly akin to the departments to be investigated. The basis of selection was, first, the pupil's grasp of the subject-matter of the school department recommending him and, secondly, his ability to present this knowledge. This last qualification was determined by the English teacher who accepted this special report in lieu of regular assignments. Then each member of this committee gave before an audience of students a three-minute oral report on the aspect of the business he had investigated. Thus, in forty-five minutes a comprehensive and intelligible insight into a great business was given a group of students as a preliminary to a talk on that same business by the president of the company. As he listened to pupils telling the story of his own plant, he was amazed by the accuracy and vividness of this presentation. The attention of the students was held throughout, proving that the speakers had met the test of such a performance.

When the director of the Art Institute, which was attempting to effect a close working connection with the city school system, invited the school to spend an evening in the galleries, the problem arose of informing the entire student body of the nature of the exhibition and of what they might expect to see. This task, of course, fell on the English department. The plan devised was to have one pupil from each English class form a general committee to go to the Institute, meet the director and docent, see the exhibits, enjoy the beautiful building and its contents, and then report. These eighty spies were given school time for the visit. They had been chosen by their fellows because they had reputations for clear oral expression.

The reports that came to me showed that this committee had measured up to its responsibility beyond expectation. When a

first-year high-school pupil can talk to his classmates, as one did, for forty minutes and keep the eager attention of his hearers, he has gained power that he will take with him outside of the school. In more than one class, the committeeman had to continue the second day in order to answer the interested questions his report called forth. When the evening of the school visit came, in spite of bad weather, by actual count, over eleven hundred visitors, a very great majority of whom were pupils, crowded the galleries. School spirit alone would not have brought that number of youngsters out at night to see an exhibit of paintings. Certainly the committee had faced with spirit its problem of creating an interest and its efforts had the proof of success.

In certain aspects of oral composition work the motive of entertainment can be effectively used. When the girls who expect to enter the city normal school, placed in one section, are studying story-telling, their work is animated by a vocational motive. That motive, however, is more or less remote. But when these girls prepare a story to tell to a first-year high-school class, they have a genuine motive that is immediate in its effect. Here is a group of strangers that can only be held by the interest in the story and in its presentation.

This life condition can be easily created in a very simple way for any sort of oral exercise by inviting in a neighboring class. This kind of visit is a worth-while thing for both classes when the social value is considered. When two first-year classes decided to present Longfellow's *Masque of Pandora*, one with simple costumes and one without, each to entertain the other, there was at once observed an improved attack on the poem, a better grasp of the thought, and, as the reading and memorizing progressed, a better appreciation. This was what the teacher sought and secured, largely through the desire to excel in presentation. The appreciative reading of the poem had a social value when there was an audience to be entertained.

One more type of project, rich in motives and full of value to a school, remains to be mentioned. A general school problem of the right sort will provide a wealth of motivation. For us a *Pageant of Chivalry* quickened the life of the school and drew all



departments closer together. What inspiration the third-year classes had for mastering Tennyson's *Idylls* when those classes were to furnish the text for the episodes! How diligently the first-year students learned their Scott to add their part! What ingenuity was called forth to devise armor and costumes and stage devices! Indeed, shop, sewing, and art teachers were hurried to keep pace with the rush of extra-enthusiastic work. October and November of that year burned into the hearts of impressionable youth the noblest ideals of chivalry. The school felt this to the core, and was conscious, long after the presentation of the pageant, of an uplifting and unifying principle in the successful completion of a common task. What matter if routine was a little damaged for a time! What matter if mathematics and science did suffer slightly for a short period! The pupils were on fire with a great idea and were driving on under the stimulus of several fine motives with an enthusiasm so contagious as to be almost persistent.

Now, I have rehearsed in some detail experiences we have had with composition projects, motivated with a distinct social aim. The results have indeed been well worth while; the margin above the cost has been great enough. None of the technical things considered necessary had to be omitted, and, in fact, the burden of that sort of instruction was somewhat lessened. All of the projects have grown out of the life of this particular school and were fitted to particular groups of children. That is the way this sort of work must be done. No one can prescribe for you the means and materials for motivating English composition. The method of making school work real must constantly grow and change. Lay firm hold of the fundamental idea that education is life itself; give your pupils problems that grow out of the social conditions of your school; show them how to solve these problems in the natural way that prevails in the world outside of the school walls, and you will put joy and efficiency into your teaching of English composition.